

Select Committee on Children's Services – 27 January 2010

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Directorate of Children's Services – Comprehensive Area Assessment:-

Purpose of Report

1. To inform members of the committee about judgements regarding Children's Services in the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) which was published in December 2009.

Background

2. The Directorate of Children's Services reports regularly to Select Committee on issues where we are performing below target in order to help members understand why this is the case, and what the Directorate of Children's Services and the Children's Trust is doing to improve. However for the purpose of the meeting on 27 January 2010 this report is based upon judgements regarding Children's Services in the Council's CAA report which was published in December 2009.
3. The full report and a summary are attached. Members of the Committee will note that there are many strengths and that Children's Services continue to be judged as good overall.
4. At the same time several areas requiring further improvement were identified. The Directorate of Children's Services and the Children's Trust are aware of all of these concerns and are already taking action to address them. Below is a summary of the main activities that are taking place

Obesity amongst children;

In conjunction with the PCT the Children's Trust has in place a strategy for reducing obesity. Much effort goes into encouraging healthy lifestyles amongst young people e.g. all schools have achieved the National Healthy Schools Standard, our Play Strategy and involvement in the Healthy Towns initiative are widely regarded as examples of good practice, and all schools are being

supported to develop travel plans which encourage, where possible, less use of motorised transport for young people.

Private fostering:

Arrangements for private fostering were judged to be inadequate as a result of our previous lack of capacity in this area. This is being addressed and we have identified resources which can be redirected to enable us to take the required action to both monitor the instances of private fostering, and to intervene if necessary.

Uneven quality of primary school provision:

It is important to clarify that all primary schools in Dudley except two are assessed as being at least adequate and nearly half are good or better. (OfSTED has judged one school to have special measures and one requiring a notice to improve. However it is vital that we create more good and outstanding primary schools and at the time of publication the CAA report recognised that there was improvement in this area already. Our Education Improvement Service makes general training and leadership/management support available to all schools. Alongside this we have a successful track record of helping specific schools that are underperforming to raise standards and improve the quality of learning. Through our National Strategies Team and the Black Country Challenge considerable extra investment is being channelled into targeted schools and there has been a slow but steady rate of improvement in Key Stage 2 test results for several years.

Number of safeguarding referrals received;

Virtually all geographical areas have experienced a very significant increase in referrals since the Baby Peter care in Haringey. This reflects heightened levels of anxiety to protect vulnerable young people and is regarded as a positive development in some quarters. However many referrals do not turn out to be appropriate and so more work is being done with all partners to improve this aspect of our performance. For example the common assessment process is being used more often and more effectively to identify vulnerable children earlier, and to take steps to support them and their families before problems escalate. There are a wide range of projects in place to improve parenting skills particularly in families where children are known to be at risk. Cooperation between agencies to identify vulnerable young people and to take effective action to prevent neglect and harm is generally good, and Dudley's Safeguarding Board is constantly striving to secure further improvements.

Gaps in achievement between vulnerable young people and their peers;

There is a strong focus on such groups e.g. looked after children, young people with disabilities and particular ethnic groups. Improving educational standards for looked after children and progress to post 16 education is a priority for the

Children's Trust and we are providing many individuals with private tuition to improve their educational attainment and personal development. Supporting young people with disabilities into post 16 education to improve their life chances and economic well being is also a priority, but remains a challenge during the transition of funding responsibility from the Learning and Skills Council to the Local Authority. However we perform well in this respect. Dudley has a very low rate of young people with disabilities becoming disengaged from education, employment and training, but we recognise that more can still be done and will seek to do so as we gain greater influence over the commissioning of post 16 education and training provision. Targeted support for specific groups of children in mainstream schools is a priority in many school improvement plans and is a feature of local authority support through the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Project.

Finance

5. Our action plans concerning improvements in these areas are based upon existing budgets.

Law

6. The main pieces of legislation governing these aspects of our work are the Children Act 2004 and the Education and Inspections Act of 2006.

Equality Impact

7. OfSTED judges that Dudley's Services for all children and young people are good but agrees with our self assessment that the progress of particular groups e.g. boys, young people in receipt of free school meals, certain ethnic groups, children in care and those with learning difficulties/disabilities should continue to be seen as priorities for improvement.

Recommendation

8. That the report be noted by the committee.



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List of Background Papers